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# POLICY IMPLEMENTATION AND INITIATIVES IN RUSSIA: A LOCAL PERSPECTIVE

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This article discusses the role of local initiatives in policy implementation in Russia. The question of the relationship between state and civic organizations in Russia is complex and problematic. On the local level, state programs and private charity funds offer some financing for local projects, realizing local initiatives. Such projects are often consequences of civic activity and would benefit from vital and well-functioning NGOs, which are rare in present-day Russia. This article introduces the main political instruments for local development and describes the experiences of local initiatives, understanding them as features of an emerging civil society in Russia. It also describes the relation between state and local activity, posing the question: what type of democracy do these local experiences indicate? A "project approach" on the local level can be thought of as an attempt by the Russian power hierarchy to solve local societal problems by combining hierarchic decision making and people's participation. It leads Russian leaders to the complicated dilemma of supporting active participation while needing to maintain control over it at the same time—in spite of that control's negative effects on local initiatives and innovation. For local citizens it creates another dilemma: they must adapt their individual agency to the social landscape of support and punishment. Finally, the article revisits James G. March and Johan P. Olsen's two models of democracy—the "aggregative pattern" and the "integrative pattern." The Russian political practice seems to attempt to adopt limited versions of both models at the same time, even if not in their purest form. The first model, the aggregative pattern, is adopted on the macro level with a strong authoritative element blended within interest mediation, and the integrative pattern is adopted at the local level combined with the construction of controlling mechanisms.

**Keywords:** Russia; Policy Implementation; Civil Society; Self-Managed Local Associations (TOS)

This article is about local initiatives in Russia. It is focused on local initiatives in the “other” Russia—the home of ordinary people, hidden away from international attention and far from the urban centers where political and economic decisions are made (Granberg and Sätre 2017). Residents of the “other” Russia are commonly portrayed as indifferent and passive. As we will show, this is not always the case. On the contrary, local actors have been able to make a difference through their own actions. The aim of this article is to analyze different types of local actions through case studies drawn from five regions in Russia: Republic of Karelia, Arkhangel’sk Oblast, Leningrad Oblast, Nizhniy Novgorod Oblast, and Novgorod Oblast.<sup>1</sup>

Beginning in the early 1990s, Russia experienced a long decline and then standstill in local development, which was reversed, to an extent, in the following decade due to the municipal reforms of 2006 and federal state funding. The roles of, and relations between, the state and civic organizations has remained, however, complex and problematic (Granberg and Sätre 2017:172–173; Salamon, Benevolenski, and Jakobson 2015). Russian leaders have repeatedly expressed the need for collaboration, not only between the administration and private firms but also including the local population. Russia still has Soviet-type NGOs<sup>2</sup> that play a role in local society. They often have a privileged position intermediating between the state and local population. Local political representation takes place mainly through elected deputies, who represent local people and mediate between them and local power holders. It seems evident, however, that local problems cannot be solved in a satisfying way through these mechanisms. In the Russian case local initiatives of cooperation with others in a similar life situation appears to be more—but not only—about coping than actually about realizing agency for changing a particular situation.

James G. March and Johan P. Olsen (1989) have suggested that there are two models of democracy. The “aggregative pattern” is an institutional type of governance that resembles a market: numerous independent actors negotiate their different interests and achieve a substantial balance in the entire sociopolitical system. The political leadership acts as a sort of mediator among contrasting interests. The “integrative pattern,” on the other hand, is a form of governance that resembles a community. The emphasis is on goods, values, and destinies, which are deemed common and more important than individual interests. The crucial factor is a common cultural identity. As Annette Aagard Thuesen argues, March and Olsen’s two approaches can be viewed as elaborations of the concepts of rational choice institutionalism and normative institutionalism (2015:79–93; see also Peters 1999). The character of democracy differs in each case, and so do the problems connected to each of them.

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<sup>1</sup> The original version of this article was presented in January 2016 at a seminar at the Aleksanteri Institute, University of Helsinki, and later in June 2016 at the 1st Tartu Conference on Russian and East-European Studies. The article is a follow-up to our book, *The Other Russia: Local Experience and Societal Change* (Granberg and Sätre 2017).

<sup>2</sup> For example, women’s councils, veterans’ councils, and youth councils were launched in the Soviet Union in the 1960s as separate but party-related top-down organizations.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The empirical data used in this article is composed of interviews with the local population of small towns and villages, as well as representatives of local administration and experts from regional centers. The data was collected in 2001–2016 by the authors and their colleagues; it includes semistructured qualitative interviews, complemented by observation and in some cases by other methods like focus groups. Interviews were typically 40–80 minutes long, structured with basic questions but varying considerably according to the location, work tasks, and socioeconomic characteristics of the interviewee.

The main set of interviews focused on local experiences of getting out of poverty and starting or developing a business. Almost all interviews included some information about the existence and types of local activities, NGOs, clubs, and so on. While collecting the data, some places were visited many times and even followed for the length of the study period, while others were visited only once or twice. The most relevant data for this article was composed of interviews collected in 2012–2016 from five Russian regions. Two projects in northwestern Russia were development projects that catalyzed local activity. The first one studied the long-term impacts (2002–2016) of a local development project based on 45 recorded and 20 unrecorded interviews. The other investigated local initiative groups in three districts in 2011–2013. Forty-three recorded and seven unrecorded interviews were conducted to test the results of this rural policy experiment.

## FEDERAL AND REGIONAL PROGRAMS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

### NATIONAL PROGRAMS

In 2005 the Russian government launched National Priority Projects focused on healthcare, housing, education, and agriculture (Appel 2008; Smyth, Lowry, and Wilkening 2007). These programs were to be implemented by governors. Russia remained an “authoritative democracy,” as Vladimir Gel’man, Sergei Ryzhenkov, and Michael Brie (2003:6–11) call the system. However, combined with the municipal reforms of 2006, this reform created opportunities for local agency. As will be shown later in this article, Russian local policy includes two interesting aspects that do not fit very well in the model of a traditional authoritative political system: projects and local agency.

First and foremost, regions and individuals have to apply to take part in the programs. Although it is difficult to estimate to what extent the programs have actually been implemented, interviews with local authorities and low-income families reveal that many have benefitted from participating.

Secondly, with its programs the state also offers resources for individuals, families, and entrepreneurs to facilitate agency toward increased well-being. According to our data, this kind of activity increased after 2007 when the National Priority Projects started. Support is available for building and reconstructing houses; for young educated teachers, doctors, and other “professionals” who settle down in rural areas; for mothers after giving birth to a second child; and for families with at least

three children. Foster families have their own program but also the opportunity to collect funding from several others and to reach an income level that is more satisfactory in a rural environment—not least because they can improve housing conditions. The state supports small entrepreneurs with investments and the same conditions are available for small farmers.

There are different barriers to getting support and there are waiting lists for those seeking support. Field research verified, however, that those who have succeeded in getting support have improved their well-being. These programs had an impact at least from 2007 to 2014, after which inflation and budget cuts increased. Also, despite the financial crisis of 2014–2017 the government has managed to keep social programs running. Because of the decreased real value of budget and governmental funds, the crisis manifests in longer queues for those applying for such support.

Autonomy is considerably broader at the local level than at the regional level. The federal level tends not to be involved directly in local political life (Ledyae, Chirickova, and Seltser 2014). Mayoral elections are often more competitive than regional legislative elections, as indicated by the fact that several opposition candidates in mayoral elections have been able to defeat candidate from the pro-Putin *Edinaia Rossiia* (United Russia) Party.

It appears that regional governors' problems fulfilling their obligations are transferred to lower levels without allocated resources, even if communities have been saddled with more obligations than before. In 2012 only 2.5 percent of districts could finance their responsibilities using their own resources (Buckley et al. 2014). In these circumstances the nonstrategic sectors have relative freedom to develop at the local level. These sectors have also often contributed to local expenditures while their payments into the state budget have been rather low. The relatively low own-source revenues of municipal and district administrations further reflect the difficulty in extracting the necessary taxes from local firms and the population.<sup>3</sup>

Our interviewees told us that there are programs that communities could take part in, in order to reduce poverty indirectly by improving roads, renovating houses, building a sports center, or, as previously mentioned, by providing jobs for young people. An example from one rural district illustrates how the mayor and the head of the district-level department of culture, both women, tried to activate people by advising them on how to apply for project funding (joint interview, November 2003). We heard the same thing several times in other communities. Local officials promoted cultural activities, education, women's clubs, and local development groups, to make people more self-confident, thus bringing about a change in the mentality of people towards seeing possibilities and taking action (interviews, November 2003, May 2011, May 2012). They also promoted the establishment of social NGOs, which are used to apply for money from welfare funds at higher levels (Sätre 2014a; Spencer and Suslova 2017).

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<sup>3</sup> This is particularly evident at the regional and local levels, since while the more volatile and unpredictable revenues from profits go to the region, the more secure sources of income go to the state (see also Thiessen 2006).

## LOCAL PROJECTS

Although social policy continues to be partly financed by the state, it is organized in a new way. Interviewees indicated that women, who are responsible for social welfare, have to find sponsors by themselves for their regular activities and to create their own support networks for this. Their agenda might be unclear, but it is distinctly larger than the directives they might be subject to from above. They are using social relations to increase their available resources, for example by applying for projects, striving to participate in state programs, and encouraging charity.

One deputy mayor in a district on the outskirts of Russia provided an example of how she has actually been able to make a difference through her own actions. Based on our data, this varies very much between communities as well as within communities. The persons in charge—their competences, experiences, attitudes, and views—are truly important. This is not to say that the right person could make a difference anywhere. Circumstances are extremely important as well. What is striking is the feeling that communities, even neighboring ones, appear to be isolated from each other. Community life is organized in a variety of ways, and awareness of development trends and possibilities are rather diverse too.

In some communities economic and social development has genuinely advanced. However, the tendency of isolation may imply that democratic trends remain local, and they are hindered by changing circumstances. This means that solutions are likely to be more heterogeneous than before. For example, longitudinal interviews with successful women provide information on how women continue to take responsibility for social welfare, how they react to this, and what their efforts comprise.

Interviews show that female officials and politicians have initiated social projects, cultural activities, and small businesses in villages. One deputy mayor reported that she had been able to receive support from a charity fund for a project directed toward youths from problem families. Another example is the “house of culture” that welcomes children from distant villages. The house arranges cultural activities for the children, and those who live far away can stay there overnight. Interviews also show that some local authorities are able to mobilize local entrepreneurs to combat poverty in Russia. This is about local officials making use of their own human capital, as well as improving the skills of the population through personal advice, projects, and educational programs (interviews with a deputy mayor, May 2011, May 2012; see also Sätre 2014b).

## CIVIL SOCIETY IN RUSSIA

### WEAK NONGOVERMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS

According to Alfred B. Evans, the mainstream thinking in social sciences is that civil society is the sphere of activity that is initiated, organized, and carried out primarily by citizens and not directed by the state. He adds: “We ... see civil society as located between the family and the state, and as distinct from the sector of businesses that are oriented primarily toward making a profit.” An important reason for

the interest in civil society is that “a thriving civil society exerts a favorable influence on the growth and consolidation of democratic political institutions” (Evans 2013:103).

Russia has its own history of civil society, which in the present form dates back to the reforms of the Soviet system after Stalinism. In the 1960s, associations such as women’s councils, writers’ associations, associations of artists, war veterans’ associations, and nature protection associations were established. They were centrally steered and controlled. During the 25 years after the fall of the Soviet Union, new civic organizations have emerged, experiencing both ups and downs. When examining civil society in Russia, one has to keep in mind the huge challenges that Russian citizens have met since the beginning of 1990s and how they have been compelled—often with some success—to find practical solutions to their needs. Such results were not possible without, at a minimum, working social relations between a limited set of people, and such relations cannot be cut off just by governmental decisions.

Although civil society was indeed growing in the 1990s, many commentators have noted that the doors have been closing again since Vladimir Putin’s rise to power. A transformation in the understanding of civil society in Russia has been noted since the 1990s: from viewing civil society as a counterforce to the state to viewing it as a collaborator with the state (Chebankova 2012). In analyzing state-society interactions in rural areas in Russia, Natalia Mamonova and Oane Visser (2014) show that many rural movements support the status quo.

The development, especially after the annexation of Crimea in 2014, makes such arguments even stronger. Indeed, we meet a “dual reality” (Salamon et al. 2015): the government has increased its efforts to control civic associations while simultaneously still explicitly trying to activate citizens and support local initiatives. On the other hand, if authorities consider NGO activities to be politically oriented rather than fulfilling social aims, initiatives taken by active citizens might be punished, for example by labeling them as political agents. The dividing line between bad and good civic activity sits somewhere between politicized actions and constructive social and cultural initiatives.

Statistics show the weak situation of NGOs. This weakness was also seen in our fieldwork. In the Republic of Karelia one can find in smaller places only a few civic organizations, even if Karelia is, according to statistical analysis by Sarah Busse Spencer and Svetlana V. Suslova (2017), one of the most active regions in this regard.

One important factor in civil society seems to be an increasing openness toward cooperating not only with relatives and close friends but also with others to fulfill a common need. This attitude was strongly uttered by one interviewee from an urban area, who told us that there was a collective attitude between neighbors, an “everybody helping each other mentality”; another person told us that some came to the NGO to ask for help on behalf of a neighbor (interview with an NGO representative of mothers’ network center, September 2010). Another observation is that those who cooperate with each other are not necessarily the most vulnerable but are more likely to be those who are marginally above the poverty line.



## CIVIC ORGANIZATIONS AS INTEREST ORGANIZATIONS AND AS TOOLS OF ADMINISTRATION

Our research identified several initiatives taken by individuals (including a former workplace leader, an entrepreneur, and a local politician) and provided evidence of the initial stages of empowering processes. However, the development and outcomes of such initiatives depended on the contexts in which they were undertaken. Where mechanisms for supporting new ventures or dialogue were lacking, such initiatives could end up as isolated events, before—if ever—there was time for them to take root.

### TOS AS A SOCIAL MOVEMENT

The TOS<sup>4</sup>-system in Arkhangel'sk Oblast is a form of support for local informal groups to implement small-scale initiatives (Granberg and Sätre 2017:172–173). We were told that the initiative for it came from a deputy in the regional parliament. For organizing and coordinating this activity, the division of work in the regional government was renewed.

The deputy in question was a former regional minister of culture. She had followed TOSs in her own district from the beginning. According to her, there are about two or three projects per year in each municipality, and it appears that this policy option has also been used in remote areas. She mentioned a few examples of what had been achieved with the community center: a shop, some cultural activities, renovating and bringing old buildings back into use, including a club hall, a mini sports center, and a volleyball field. There were many plans for her district both in the center and in villages: some wanted to build a new training hall for billiards, others wanted to decorate their village by planting flowers at the bus stop. In this region there are villages on both sides of the river. Therefore funding has been used to build a couple of bridges across the river. It appears that creating a TOS in itself is not so much about getting more influence at the local level—it is more about creating something for the local place or for solving concrete practical issues. It provides occasional opportunities for meeting people, to get together around common interests; however, it does not include any mechanism for providing continuity of activities (interview, September 2014).

Via the TOS program hundreds of local teams were organized in Arkhangel'sk Oblast. Some of the interviewed activists and representatives expressed that there was an obvious need to transform the local projects into more formal and registered organizations, as well as to facilitate longer-term work. So far a lack of autonomy characterizes TOSs, which may complicate management and financial practices. Some TOSs are steering funding through municipal bank accounts, some others through the accounts of NGOs. There are few NGOs, however, and these solutions have been impractical because projects may have an ongoing need to collect and use money. We were told about proposals to change some TOSs into NGOs through the registration

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<sup>4</sup> TOS stands for *territorial'noe obshchestvennoe samoupravlenie* (self-managed local association) (*Vestnik TOS* 2013).



and opening of the TOSs own bank accounts. This has already been done several times (*Vestnik TOS* 2013). It is an interesting direction, against the background of the Russian policy of stricter control around the formation of NGOs. Whether it will lead to contradictions remains to be seen.

The TOS system is a social movement. It expresses the desires of local people to work together to make their life better, both materially and socially. TOSs are also working in some other places, for example in the city of Kirov, where among others, homeowners' associations have used TOS as a cooperation platform to carry out needed renovations in their residential area (Shagalov 2015).

The Ladoga Initiative was a development project in 2011–2013 in three districts of the Republic of Karelia and Leningrad Oblast (Granberg, Nikula, and Kopoteva 2015). It organized local groups to create their own initiatives: a small amount of support was given for them to buy materials, while villagers worked voluntarily to build children's playgrounds, renovate cultural houses and sports fields, and organize local cultural events. These microprojects verified that there was high local interest in cooperating for common goals. The problem was not in finding active people to plan a project and to volunteer to implement these plans. Rather, the problems were practical: informal groups had no right to have bank accounts, and they could not guarantee a continuation of the activity after the funding period.

## CLUBS AND MEETINGS

Interviews gave information on the needs for joint organizations in some social policy areas, to arrange care for family members (such as disabled children), and to distribute information and organize assistance for those needing it (such as foster parents). One solution was a club for foster families. Another was a meeting for parents of handicapped children, organized on a permanent basis by a social worker and run in her free time. All these kinds of solutions might be organized on a stronger basis if they were undertaken by a registered association with a budget, continuity, rights to represent the members, and a clear division of responsibilities.

TOSs, clubs, and meetings can be described as elements of an early phase of civil society. They are the forms of civic activity that are possible to develop in the present circumstances in Russia.

## A LOCAL DEVELOPMENT FUND

Another organized solution is a local fund. One brand new fund was established in a rural district center. It collected donations to respond to local needs and organized activities to help people with disabilities. It aimed to help those in need, on the one hand, and to give impulses for local development, on the other. As noted by the leader of this fund (interview, April 2015), such activity was supported by "political power" (*vlast'*). However, the fund needed to make some arrangements, keeping an eye on "possible misuse," and therefore a board of local trusted persons was nominated.

This looks quite contradictory: first, local initiatives and local cooperation for accepted purposes are approved and in many cases viewed positively by the state; secondly, any cooperation between people that has a political character is controlled,

especially if foreign funders are sponsoring it; and thirdly, some regional governments seem to be moving further towards an organized civil society. An open issue is where the line between accepted cooperation and nonaccepted cooperation is, from the perspective of the federal state and regional power holders.

## **CONCLUSION: THE DILEMMA OF A HIERARCHICAL SOCIETY**

The National Priority Projects have three aspects worth remarking on. Firstly, the programs are a result of the crucial decision on how to use increased energy incomes. Secondly, the programs facilitate new institutional arrangements in the welfare sector, such as closing children's homes and building a family-based system of foster care instead. Thirdly, the programs include the idea of a project-based method of implementing political programs.

Projects as a tool for implementing policy were developed considerably by the European Union, which wanted to find an alternative to its member states' national funding systems, allocating budgets through sectoral administrations. Projects are an important element of the "new governance" approach (Sjöblom et al. 2012). As an example, the LEADER approach, which was applied in the Ladoga Initiative mentioned earlier, is the core of the European Union's rural policy. It is based on local projects, partnership relations between different stakeholders, and local level planning.

Indeed, Russian leaders have expressed a need for collaboration not only between the administration and private firms but also with the local population. Since the reforms to local administration in 2006, local political representation has taken place mainly through deputies, who mediate between the people and state power. This reform was, in a way, a change towards local democracy; however, it seems evident that local problems cannot be solved in a satisfying way without complementary reforms.

Adopting as a further step the "project approach" demonstrates how the Russian power hierarchy cannot solve societal problems through top-down decision making but needs people's participation. At the same time, Russian leaders have difficulties trusting Russian citizens, and therefore citizens' activity must be controlled. This leads Russian leaders to a complicated dilemma: they want to support active participation while increasing control over it at the same time—with probably negative effects on local initiatives and innovations. For local citizens it means the dilemma of living in a kind of "dual reality," needing to find a balance between support and punishment.

Russia's domestic politics is said to be based on the model of authoritative democracy. The country has a tradition of hierarchies, strong centralization, and standardization of local politics. However, hierarchical administration cannot properly reach the local level, not least because of a lack of resources at the local level. Therefore, the alternative seems to be opening space for local agency to solve local problems by locals themselves and applying strict control of local activities when needed. When channeling funds to the local level, some elements of new governance are ap-

plied, but this for its part gives us reason to ask whether Russia can use similar policy approaches to project governance as the EU without consequences for the country's traditional features. Does the implementation of new policy measures—typical of new governance—in the long run lead to the transformation of politics in a less centralized, more regionally and locally variable direction?

Returning to March and Olsen's (1989) two basic models of democracy, our empirical analysis suggests that Russia fits neither the aggregative approach nor the integrative approach, even if features of both exist in Russia, with additional authoritative elements. It seems, instead, that Russian political practice is attempting to adopt both models at the same time even if not in their pure forms. The first one, the aggregative pattern, is adopted on a macro level with a strong authoritative element blended with interest mediation; and the other one, the integrative pattern, is adopted at the local level combined with the construction of controlling mechanisms.

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## РЕАЛИЗАЦИЯ ГОСУДАРСТВЕННОЙ ПОЛИТИКИ НА МЕСТАХ И ГРАЖДАНСКИЕ ИНИЦИАТИВЫ В РОССИИ: ЛОКАЛЬНАЯ ПЕРСПЕКТИВА

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В статье обсуждается роль локальных инициатив в обеспечении реализации государственной политики на местах в современной России. Отношения между государством и гражданскими низовыми инициативами в России сложны и проблемны. Проекты локального уровня получают некоторую финансовую поддержку от государственных программ и частных благотворительных фондов, что позволяет реализовывать местные инициативы. Поскольку такие проекты чаще всего являются результатом гражданской активности, они могли бы пользоваться поддержкой развитых, эффективно функционирующих негосударственных организаций, однако в современной России это не так. В статье рассматриваются основные политические

инструменты местного развития с опорой на опыт локальных инициатив, которые воспринимаются авторами как приметы развивающегося гражданского общества в России. Описываемые в работе взаимоотношения между государством и местными инициативами подводят к вопросу о типе демократии, на который указывает местный опыт. «Проектный подход» на локальном уровне может пониматься как попытка российской власти решить локальные социальные проблемы, используя сочетание иерархической структуры принятия решений и прямого гражданского участия. Эта попытка ставит представителей государственного управления в противоречивую ситуацию, когда они вынуждены поддерживать активность граждан, одновременно считая необходимым его контролировать, – притом что контроль негативно влияет на местные инициативы и инновации. Для местных жителей дилемма состоит в том, что они вынуждены адаптировать свою деятельность к ситуации одновременной поддержки и наказаний. Наконец, в статье рассматриваются две модели демократии, предложенные Джеймсом Марчем и Йоханом Олсеном: «агрегативный» и «интегративный» варианты. В российской политической практике наблюдаются попытки одновременного применения обеих моделей в ограниченном виде. На макроуровне, где посредничество между различными интересами базируется на сильном авторитарном элементе, применяется агрегативный шаблон. Интегративный шаблон же используется на локальном уровне в сочетании с формированием контролирующих механизмов.

**Ключевые слова:** Россия; реализация политики; гражданское общество; территориальное общественное самоуправление